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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HAVANA 012981

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STATE DEPT FOR WHA/CCA

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TAGS: [PINR](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [SOCI](#) [CU](#)

SUBJECT: EX-POLITBURO MEMBER CONVICTED OF INFLUENCE-PEDDLING

REF: HAVANA 09343

HAVANA 00012981 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: COM Michael Parmly for Reason 1.4(d).

¶11. (C) Summary: A Cuban court has convicted Juan Carlos Robinson Agramonte, a former member of the Cuban Communist Party's Political Bureau (Politburo), of influence-peddling and sentenced him to 12 years in prison. The June 16 conviction was announced June 21 in a page-two bulletin in state-controlled newspaper "Granma." Robinson allegedly accepted responsibility for abusing his position, forgetting his obligations and using his influence for personal gain. No details were provided and the trial was not open to the public. Pro-democracy activists offered mixed views on the conviction. It is unclear whether Robinson's purge was a blow against corruption, a reaction to Robinson's suspected criticism of GOC policy, or evidence of an internal GOC power struggle. Either way, a chill is running through the nomenklatura as other Cuban officials consider their own dirty laundry. End Summary.

¶12. (C) Juan Carlos Robinson Agramonte, banished from the Politburo on April 26 for "arrogance, pretension and conduct unbefitting a Communist," was convicted of influence-peddling June 16 by a Havana court and given a 12-year sentence. The prosecution had sought a 15-year term. The trial was off-limits to the public and foreign observers, and details of the crime were not provided, although a page-two bulletin in "Granma" made reference to 16 witnesses and "ample documentary evidence." Robinson, a skilled administrator, served as CP chief in the southern provinces of Santiago and Guantanamo before joining the Politburo in 1997.

¶13. (C) It is not known which of Cuba's 250 prisons will become Robinson's new home. Pro-democracy activist Martha Beatriz Roque told us that before his trial the 49-year-old Robinson was held at Villa Marista, the State Security interrogation center modeled on the KGB's Lubyanka. Activists had mixed views on the conviction. "Ladies in White" Melba Santana and Giselda Verdecia on June 21 welcomed the court's decision, saying senior GOC officials should not be above the law. However, Elizardo Sanchez of the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation criticized the conviction, saying the lack of judicial independence denied Robinson a fair trial. Sanchez also said the conviction disproved Fidel Castro's "years of statements that there is no corruption in the upper reaches of the Government," and called the 12-year sentence excessive.

LOYAL TO THE REVOLUTION

¶4. (C) Although Robinson was viewed by many observers as loyal to the Revolution, speculation abounds that he was caught criticizing GOC policy. However, there is no hard evidence to support this theory. Nor is there proof that he was caught illegally acquiring houses or vehicles for relatives, as others have speculated. We have heard of Robinson's penchant for expensive liquor, and his use of a private generator to light up his home while neighbors suffered through blackouts. These may well have attracted senior-level attention to his comfortable lifestyle. At any rate, allegations of misconduct have hounded Robinson for nearly a decade. That he was able to avoid punishment for so long, perhaps due to his connections with GOC heavyweight Esteban Lazo, is seen by the fact that Robinson ran over a person with his car in 1980 but did not stand trial.

FALLING OFF THE FAST TRACK

¶5. (C) The career of Robinson, a former member of the Union of Communist Youth (UJC) who taught in Angola, hit the fast track in the early 1980s. By 1992, he was chief of the CP in Guantanamo, and two years later held the same position in Santiago. Following his 1997 promotion to the Politburo, he was appointed head of the Central Committee's department of economy, transportation and tourism. Along the way, however, he was reprimanded by Raul Castro for his "arrogance and abuse of power." Robinson also somehow drew the wrath of Machado Ventura, a powerful GOC official linked to Raul Castro. (Comment: It is possible that, corruption and criticism aside, Robinson's purge was simply a product of the bad blood between him and the more-powerful Ventura and even Raul. End Comment.)

COMMENT

HAVANA 00012981 002.2 OF 002

¶6. (C) Robinson's conviction comes amid a GOC crackdown that has targeted corrupt gas station attendants, port workers, farmer's market vendors and others. But if the GOC were to crack down on every CP or GOC official who carried out a little "business" on the side, the already-crowded prisons would overflow. Dissident economist Oscar Espinosa Chepe told us June 20 that near his apartment, the family of a senior GOC official regularly sells bootleg liquor and the authorities, while aware, appear unconcerned.

¶7. (C) Why, then, was Robinson singled out, given that his "sins" are probably little or no worse than those of other GOC officials? We can only speculate. Robinson was one of only two Afro-Cubans in the Politburo, but we see no clear evidence of racism behind his purge. No details of Robinson's allegedly corrupt activities have been made public, and in the absence of any such information we are inclined to believe that his ouster was the result of an internal GOC power struggle. Whoever was the driving force behind Robinson's purge was able to work it through the context of the GOC's campaign against corruption, and send the requisite warning to other senior GOC officials.

PARMLY